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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine how undergraduates with little or no field experiences in school classrooms make sense out of university course work. This document presents the story of one preservice teacher, Jeneane, a 22-year old woman preparing to teach English. Jeneane's learning from a teacher education course should be a tale replete with conflict and struggle ending in a climactic moment of either rejection of course ideas or development of new understandings. It is not. Instead, it is an account of how one highly motivated, thoughtful, and bright preservice teacher engaged positively in professional study without ever noticing or reacting to major discrepancies between her beliefs and those her professor affirmed. Interview data shed light on the process she used to interact with course work, without identifying conflicting theories of how students learn or noticing that her rationales for embracing course ideas differed from her professor's. Jeneane's case suggests a series of responsibilities that teacher educators may consider incorporating into a pedagogy for preservice teacher education. Contains 13 references. (Author/LL)

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Diane Holt-Reynolds

NCRTL

National Center for Research on Teacher Learning

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Abstract

The story of Jeneane's learning from a teacher education course should be a tale replete with conflict and struggle ending in a climatic moment of either rejection of course ideas or development of new understandings. It is not. Instead, it is an account of how one highly motivated, thoughtful, and bright preservice teacher engaged positively in professional study without ever noticing or reacting to major discrepancies between her beliefs and those her professor affirmed. Interview data shed light on the process she used to interact with course work without identifying conflicting theories of how students learn or noticing that her rationales for embracing course ideas differed from her professor's. Jeneane's case suggests a series of responsibilities that teacher educators may consider incorporating into a pedagogy for preservice teacher education.

WHEN "I LOVED YOUR COURSE!" IS BAD NEWS: THE CASE OF JENEANE

Diane Holt-Reynolds

When Jeneane walked into my office early on a summer afternoon, what struck me first was her calm, self-assured manner. She carried herself with a poise and dignity I seldom see in undergraduates, and she spoke in that elegant, symmetrically-balanced prose usually reserved for narrators in novels. She was twenty-two years old, African-American, and had come to see me because she agreed to participate in a study I was beginning as a way to understand how undergraduates with little or no field experiences in school classrooms make sense out of university course work.

I found out a lot about Jeneane that first day. She had hoped for a career in journalism but, fearing that such a career might be difficult to launch, had decided that she would be wise to prepare for at least a temporary stint as an English teacher. Consequently, as a fourth year undergraduate student with an English major almost completed, she had enrolled in the reading course I was using as a research site. But she had certainly not abandoned her journalistic interests. She was working that summer as editor for an undergraduate library publication and as a free lance journalist for a local newspaper.

Diane Holt-Reynolds, an assistant professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, is a senior researcher with the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. She is currently involved in learning more about the relationships between personal history, subject matter knowledge and adult development and the influences of these interactions on the learning of preservice teachers.

A version of this publication is in press with *Teacher Education Quarterly*.

Like the others who participated in the study, Jeneane talked with me on six occasions across the duration of the term and shared copies of everything she wrote for the course. As I pressed her to discuss her perceptions of the potential value of the ideas she encountered in the course, she talked with artful ease about her positive regard for those ideas. When I asked her to help me understand how she knew that ideas she was encountering in a summer term campus-based course would be useful later in a school classroom, she tied each to her sense of what "good teachers" should do and be like. When I asked how these beliefs about teaching and teachers had developed, she narrated the connections she saw between her experiences of home, community, and being a student and her convictions about teaching.

They were lively, engaging conversations. As a teacher educator committed to developing cooperative relationships with those who want to become teachers, I developed across the term a deep respect for Jeneane. She presented herself as a thoughtful, intelligent, energetic young woman who valued high school students and wanted very much to teach them well. However, I found myself listening with special attention to her rationales for adopting the "new" ideas and activities she was encountering. As I mentally compared her reasons for engaging students in these activities with the reasons her professor offered, I experienced a kind of alarm. Did Jeneane's professor realize how different her rationales for adopting particular practices were from his own? Would he be satisfied with Jeneane's understanding if he had the same access to her thinking as I had? Once she tried these ideas in a classroom, might they help her achieve the goals to which she had tied them? What might it mean to Jeneane in terms of teaching effectiveness and personal

satisfaction in her ability to realize her goals if her particular mixture of purposes and activity choices failed to flourish? Does a teacher educator have the responsibility to help a beginner like Jeneane notice that she has separated a strategy from its rationale and attached it to an end it may not serve? How can we seem to be engaging with preservice teachers in conversations and activities that we agree will improve learning in tomorrow's classrooms while actually failing to catch an accurate sense of how our emerging colleagues make sense of what we say and do together?

These questions have guided my thinking as I have revisited my conversations with Jeneane via transcriptions of the interviews and tried to understand her. They also shape the form or structure of the story I will tell about her. In some ways, it's a bit of an atypical tale that no conflict between protagonist and antagonist developed across the term. There was no climactic moment where Jeneane and the professor who taught that term, Jim Barnett, debated the relative merits of ideas or the efficacy of the goals each saw as vital. Jeneane engaged in no covert conversations with me about the errors, flaws or shortcomings of Barnett's vision for classrooms. Jeneane came to every class, participated actively in discussions, submitted assignments and received exemplary marks. In interviews, she praised Barnett's teaching and spoke enthusiastically about strategies he advocated. She simply valued these practices based on rationales very different from Barnett's. And neither Barnett nor Jeneane gave any evidence of knowing how very different their rationales were.

What follows is neither expose nor tribute. Reading the story of Jeneane's responses to her course as if it were a commentary on the successes, failures or even the limitations of a particular pedagogical approach would be to miss the point entirely. For while we most often think of teaching and learning as events connected causally, with each influencing, modifying and shaping the other, the story of Jeneane's encounter with course work offers an opportunity to confront the sometimes illusionary and always uncertain nature of those connections. Even as we scrutinize and fine tune our syllabi, rehearse our arguments, polish our rationales, and otherwise prepare to act as if presenting our ideas in carefully organized, well-reasoned ways can and will efficiently teach those ideas to preservice teachers who will react by learning everything exactly as we hope, we know that we pursue the inherently impossible. We know that learning occurs in the internal, mentally independent world of students, a world we as teachers can never fully manipulate, modify or monitor. We know that learning is indeed the result of a learner's efforts to construct meaning. Still, given the pressures and routines of our lives as teachers of those who want to teach, we are "apt to forget to remember" (cummings, 1940). Jeneane's case may refresh our memories, trouble our traditional strategies for interacting with preservice teachers and invite us to imagine new strategies for gaining access to and participation in the meaning-making processes of those we teach.

The process of storytelling generally assumes that the teller will share pertinent background information with the reader before proceeding to the heart of the tale. Consequently, as a teller acting in good faith, I begin this story with a description of the principles for good teaching and the rationales that supported them as Barnett presented them in the reading course Jeneane took. My account of Jeneane's personal history and of the conclusions she had reached about what constitutes good teaching prior to enrolling in this course follows.

The heart of a story, however, centers around conflicts that develop. There was indeed ample potential for conflict between the research-based arguments Jeneane encountered through this course and the personal history-based arguments (see Fenstermacher, 1986; Fenstermacher & Richardson, in press) she had developed prior to the course as well as those she employed to defend her decisions about the value of those research-based ideas. Yet Jeneane expressed no awareness of these conflicts. A description of how Jeneane reacted *without identifying conflicts* suggests that Jeneane's case may be especially meaningful for those of us who hope to influence the thinking of preservice teachers. In the second part of this story, I describe and analyze this interaction. My version of Jeneane's case concludes with an examination

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of the strategies she used to make sense of her course and what her strategies suggest to me as I learn more about how to do the work of teacher education.

Beginnings: Jeneane and a Content Area Reading Course

Jeneane encountered something called Content Area Reading in the summer just prior to a semester of field work and following a semester of course work in educational psychology and multi-cultural education. Since this course provided a set of ideas and experiences that Jeneane co-opted and used to validate her pre-existing beliefs about teaching, it helps to look at what the course attempted to provide.

The Course

Content Area Reading is a course mandated by most states for secondary teachers who wish to be certified. At the mid-western university where Jeneane was enrolled, course sections included specialists representing all subject matter disciplines. This meant Barnett designed a course to address reading in such diverse contexts as music, math, English, social sciences, foreign languages, science, physical education and social studies. His own school teaching experience had been with junior high school remedial reading students, and his academic research interests focused on writing as a tool for helping students read to learn. Given his teaching experiences, his research interests and the remarkable diversity in the texts from which those enrolled would be likely to teach, Barnett chose to structure this course around principles for helping high school students use reading, writing and discussing as tools for learning subject matter. He emphasized rationales and methods for teaching students how to use each of these tools as processes rather than as ends in themselves.

Strategies and Rationales Jeneane Encountered

Barnett talked about teaching students to function as independent makers of meaning. He identified teacher-talk, or lecture, as antithetical to that process. Instead, he advocated helping students become independent readers of texts. To that end, Barnett invited Jeneane and her colleagues to examine and analyze high school textbooks and identify their structures and formats. Next, he proposed teaching specific reading strategies designed to help students monitor their own reading comprehension and adjust for text structures. Barnett categorized these strategies as direct instruction about the processes of "reading to learn."

Barnett also advocated strategies for helping students become independent organizers of information. He promoted journal writing, unfinished writing, in-class "fast writes" and other "writing to learn" activities as a primary way for students to discover existing, relevant schema, frame questions about content and make connections across topics and ideas.

Barnett also explored the benefits of student-centered research. Specifically, he asked students to complete an I-Search (see Macrorie, 1988)—an investigation of any topic or question that the student researcher found intrinsically interesting—as part of the course. Non-traditional resources like informal interviews with available, knowledgeable people, on-sight inspections and phone calls counted as the primary data for these I-Searches. I-Searches culminated in written, narrative accounts of the process of the search.

The I-Search projects served as vehicles or models which Barnett used to illustrate his belief that helping students learn means showing them how to engage in the processes of learning. I-Search texts focus on the story of the search—on descriptions of the processes the author used for getting the information—rather than exclusively on what the author discovered. Barnett hoped that preservice teachers' engagement with this project as a first hand experience would help them focus on how they could help their future students learn to be discoverers of information, makers of meaning and skilled at the processes of asking questions and finding answers by engaging in personal inquiry on a topic of personal rather than assigned interest.

Barnett also advocated small group, peer discussions as opportunities for students to discover questions, raise possible solutions, connect reading to personal experience and develop independence. He especially

stressed the value to learners when teachers use reading, writing and discussing in combination around a single topic, concept or idea.

Principles Jeneane Encountered

Barnett talked with me following each session of the course and so explicitly identified the principles he had stressed in the session. Across the course, he advocated constructivist theories of knowing; he stressed the cognitive variables associated with comprehension of text and proposed teacher mediations between those variables and the reading demands inherent to textbooks; he promoted writing and small group discussions as ways to invite students to make meaning from reading, and he argued that engaging students in reading allowed them independent access to the knowledge base of a discipline in a way that lectures limited. He discussed issues of student motivation and interest obliquely and only as these might be extra benefits of engaging students in acts of personally meaningful reading and writing. Barnett focused on teaching in ways that would help students acquire cognitive skills and mastery of cognitive processes.

Jeneane's Prior Experiences

For Jeneane, school, teaching and learning were about feelings, not cognitive processes. Her stories of her home, her school life and her broader community life focused on how she experienced and managed the realities of living as a young African-American woman in an almost exclusively white, predominantly Jewish, affluent neighborhood. She labeled her background "privileged." While home and community life stories were frequent in Jeneane's conversation, she featured stories of schooling experiences most prominently as she attempted to explain her rationales for accepting course-based ideas.

Competition Is Painful

Jeneane grew up in a suburb of a major midwestern city. She remembered her parents as quite supportive of her educational progress. When math classes became increasingly difficult for her, they hired a tutor; when she felt uncomfortable expressing herself in class, they reminded her that her ideas "were just as important as anybody else's." Grades mattered in Jeneane's family. So did competition in other arenas. Until she was fourteen, Jeneane took figure skating lessons and competed with other skaters in classed competitions that tracked skaters toward Olympic possibilities. She stopped skating competitively after failing in three successive trials to qualify for and advance to the next class or level of competition. She failed each time by less than one tenth of a point. Jeneane and her family finally concluded that these failures were an indication of the area's unwillingness to allow an African-American skater access to national, international, or Olympic competitions.

Jeneane told the figure skating story along with several stories of her reactions to competition in school settings. As a university student, she originally declared herself a business major, but because she "didn't like all that pressure and competition," she changed her major to English. Initially, she planned to enter the field of advertising; however, she soon realized that the field was "a little bit too fast paced" for her and decided to pursue a career in journalism instead.

Diversity Is Uncomfortable

Jeneane described the high school she attended as a place where "Everyone was going to college and was going to be something." Doing well academically was, she recalled, accompanied by status and peer approval. She took college preparatory electives and special college preparatory or honors sections of required subjects. The school had a student body of almost fifteen hundred; yet, out of her graduating class, Jeneane was one of only a few African-American students. Therefore, she was almost always the only African-American student in the subgroups that made up her academic day.

However, as academically ideal as this context may have been in an objective sense, Jeneane's subjective, social experience was one of discomfort. She reported feeling uncomfortable both when her minority position was ignored and when singled out as the authority on the "black perspective" in history or literature classes.

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> All throughout high school I was the only black student in every single one of my classes. I had maybe five black students graduate in my class. My parents always made me feel very good about myself. But there were times when, although I knew that anything I had to say was as important as [what] anyone else [said], I would sit back [and] I wouldn't say anything. For instance, when we talked about slavery, I knew that [what] they were saying wasn't true. I knew the book was wrong, but I got tired of having to be the person who was the authority. I was tired of teachers saying to me, "Well what do you think?" Sometimes I would have said more if I would have felt more comfortable.
>
> In English class we were going to read *The Color Purple*, and I really didn't feel comfortable reading the book in class. I guess that what makes me more aware of it [is] that I was always the student who had the potential to feel uncomfortable, and sometimes I overcame it. Most of the time I did, but sometimes I didn't.[1]

Jeneane experienced comfort—or the lack of it—as a concern. She placed it into a larger category of concerns all involving teachers' respect for and responses to diversity. Certainly she was different from her peers and a minority racially, but Jeneane also felt different from her classmates and in the intellectual minority in her math classes. Math was consistently difficult for her while apparently easy for others in the academically challenging honors sections of the math classes in which she enrolled as part of her general college preparatory curriculum. In advanced math classes she found herself wanting to raise questions that she feared teachers or peers would see as "stupid" or that teachers might feel they had already answered. Jeneane recalled feeling uncomfortable and therefore remaining silent at times when she believed that teachers might not respect her as an individual learner with specific questions and personal pacing needs.

> [Whether or not I asked questions] depended on the teacher, and it depended on the kids who were in the class. For the most part, I *would* raise my hand [and say], "I just don't understand," or, "I disagree," or, "I think that is really a good idea." But there were times—in geometry and physics—when I remember my teachers getting upset and saying "Look, I explained it." I knew I wasn't the only one who didn't understand, so I didn't feel like this was a personal thing. I would just stop at that point and not even pay attention because I knew if I didn't understand A, I couldn't understand B. So I would get frustrated in that sense. I always felt that there were other kids who would have said more or could have said more—maybe sometimes I would have said more if I would have felt more comfortable.

At home working with her tutor who went at a pace more appropriate for her and allowed lots of questions Jeneane learned math and performed successfully on class exams.

Therefore, Good Teachers Should . . .

Help students feel comfortable. Jeneane's conclusions about how "good" teachers should interact with students are foreshadowed in her comment above. She believed that students will learn if they are comfortable in the classroom environment. Long before enrolling in teacher education course work, Jeneane had decided that teachers should make students feel comfortable in their classrooms.

> Looking back at teachers that I really enjoyed, who I thought were doing the right thing, the first thing that teachers did was to make me feel comfortable in the classroom and with them. I felt comfortable enough to talk to them, not as an authority figure, but as someone who was there to help me. I just think that has to be hard to really make people that comfortable. . . . It takes a lot of initiative on the teacher's part to want to do that for their classroom.

From Jeneane's perspective as a student, this desire for comfort was central. It is little wonder that, as she projected herself into her future role as a teacher, she wanted to create for her students the thing she most valued as a student but had seldom experienced. I asked her to tell me what her future, comfortable classroom would be like. She told me it would be:

> Open. Students [would] have a good time, not dread coming to my class. Comfortable in the sense that they will come to class and question me. . . . I want a classroom where my students feel comfortable and disagree with me. If they know more than I do about something, [they feel] that is fine, and they speak up about it. [Students] feel comfortable about how to express themselves on paper and [know] that it's okay to disagree. . . . They would feel that they can say whatever they want to say, that I am

> open enough to sit down and talk [about] whatever they want to talk about. I hope I would come across to them as a person as well as a teacher.

Foster respect for differences. Jeneane's experiences as a student suggested to her that students can feel uncomfortable if characteristics that make them different are not explicitly respected. These characteristics might include racial diversity, diversity in learning style or pace and diversity of opinion. For Jeneane, an ideal teacher would not only respect all forms of diversity, she would aggressively foster the expression of diverse points of view through literature selections and classroom practices.

> I think literature is one way to show students that differences are okay. The only way you can find out about difference and learn about different people is to read and do research and talk to people. I want to show students the victims' side of racism so they can learn how people who are dealing with this are feeling. [I would create] a mini packet [of readings] about racism and the way black people were forced to be compliant and how that still exists today, but we don't hear about it because we are told what the institutions and society want us to hear. So that's why we believe what we believe. [But] I want to help students form their own opinions.

Jeneane also had already imagined a series of strategies she believed would help her create this comfortable classroom where respect for diversity would be fostered. She had a list of authors ready for inclusion in the special "mini packet of readings" she described; the list included no traditionally canonized authors, no white males. Jeneane explained her goals for creating this special set of readings.

> I want to expose students to new ideas and make them think about new ideas. They may never agree and may never understand, but at least [they may] be able to respect that [author's] perspective. After this [set of readings], I would hope that students would have a better understanding of racism, of slavery, of the civil rights movement, of the effects of things—not that they would necessarily change their opinions, but that they would have more to base an opinion on. Because a lot of the opinions these students have are their parents' opinions. Hopefully having discussions and doing things that focus on their feelings and their thoughts will make them realize that they can form their own opinions and that they can be different from their parents. And that's okay. "I can form my own ideas, and I can form my own opinions, and I may not agree with the teacher, and I may not agree with my best friend, and I may not agree with mom and dad. But it's my opinion, and it's okay because it's my opinion, and no one is really right and wrong." You have to respect people for what they believe. Ultimately that's what I would like to come across.

Use authority carefully and share it when possible. Listening to Jeneane and rereading her comments as cited here, I was and am struck with the coherence of her classroom-specific schema for "comfort." She described a complex set of interpersonal relationships and classroom environments which she believed would combine to produce comfort for students. Yet, in even the few comments cited above, Jeneane's recognition of the potential difficulty created by teachers' traditional role as authority figures is evident. She felt comfortable with teachers who talked "not as an authority figure but as someone who was there to help me." She hoped to have a classroom where "students feel comfortable and disagree with me."

As we talked together, the problem of authority as it might impact students' comfort surfaced again and again. Most often, Jeneane talked about how a teacher's authority might act as a barrier to students' expressions of divergent points of view. She noted that teachers should be especially sensitive to their use of authority or power when assessing students' writing and when leading class discussions. In each context, Jeneane talked about how a teacher's inherent authority as teacher might prove counter-productive.

> To give a paper back with all red marks on it—[that is] the intimidating way that teachers have with students where they have power and control over students. [Teachers need] to be careful not to abuse that. [Students] are told to listen to what the teacher says because teachers are always right. "This is an authority figure and someone older than yourself. You look up to that person because this person is a teacher and is supposed to be knowledgeable. You are supposed to believe everything the teacher says." If the teacher says you are a horrible writer, you are going to believe that. Teachers need to realize the amount of control

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they do have over their students. They need to exert that control positively. . . . In high school there isn't a lot of discussion [because] teachers are the authority figure, and whatever they say goes. They don't expect students to ask questions or want to talk about anything, and students take the attitude that, "He or she knows more than I do, so I will just sit back and not say anything." I have always thought it was important to talk to kids and let them say what their view points are.

Repeatedly, Jeneane expressed a strong commitment to making students comfortable enough that they would be able to express themselves. As corollary issues, she identified tolerance for diversity as a central enabler for students' self expression and teachers' authority as counter-productive to it. Even before encountering Professor Barnett's ideas about the value of writing and discussing, she had decided that both writing and whole class discussions would be ways to invite students to express their points of view freely.

Encourage questions and free expression of opinions. Jeneane explicitly linked comfortableness with student self-expression. But I was not sure whether she valued self expression as an end in itself or as a means to some other instructional or interpersonal end. So, I asked. "You've said that people should be comfortable [in the classroom]. Can you explain how that helps? Why is that so important?" Jeneane responded by restating her perception that comfort clears the way for self-revealing talk. Then, she went on to explain the value of feeling free to ask questions.

> I just think that people have a tendency to open up or to talk more when they feel that they are in a comfortable environment, and they feel comfortable. When you meet someone for the first time, you are not immediately comfortable with that person because you don't know that person. If you start to talk and to get to know one another, you feel much more comfortable. You feel you can say more. I think that it's the same way in the classroom. If students come in every day and feel very apprehensive, feel like anything they say is going to be shot down, feel that they can't raise their hand and ask a question that may have been answered five or six times already . . . without the teacher getting exasperated, I don't think you are going to have a good class because students are people and pick up on things differently. It takes different kids more or less amounts of time to learn something, to understand something, to read something. If you are not in an atmosphere where it's okay to be different, [where] it's okay not to be the fastest reader, [where] it's okay to be the student who always says, "This is a dumb question, but I have to ask it," if you're not in a situation like that, you'll probably learn, but you're not going to learn as well. The quality of your learning is not going to be as good as if you were in an environment where you felt comfortable, where you felt like you could say to the teacher, "I know you just explained all of this, but I just don't understand it. It's just not clicking for me." The teacher [should] give you some alternative or make you feel good—not make you feel stupid because you don't understand. I just think that is really really important especially for kids to know that they can ask questions like that—that it's okay to go against what the norm is doing. . . . The only way you can learn is to ask questions and to voice what you have heard and what are your beliefs.

Care about students. While the themes of establishing student comfort, respecting and advocating diversity of opinion and expression and warding off the ill effects of teachers' authority dominated Jeneane's conversation about good teaching, she, like all preservice teachers with whom I have ever discussed teaching at any length, also identified teacher caring and something we have come to call "teacher interestingness" as factors able to influence students' learning.

> As a student in high school, I remember certain teachers that I really liked because they seemed to genuinely care for their students. Students were learning in their classes. Then I had teachers who just really didn't seem to care, who were there just to pick up their paychecks. That had an impact on me because I felt that they were being paid to help me learn. It made me think, "I don't want to be a teacher like that." It's important to try and make a difference in your students' lives, to want your students to learn and to do whatever you have to to help them learn.

She cited an example of how caring helped a friend of hers.

> He just went to school, and never did anything, and no one knew the potential he had until they put him in summer school, and someone was constantly watching him and making sure that he did his homework. Someone showed that they cared.

Make the subject matter interesting. Jeneane believed that when teachers care a lot about students, students somehow learn more. This belief is often expressed by other preservice teachers. Similarly, her belief that students learn more, better and faster if they are interested in the subject matter or if the teacher herself is interesting was also typical.

> You pay more attention to teachers that are doing what you are really interested in. The science teacher and myself may be trying to get across the same virtues. One student may pick it up in my class because they are interested in what I'm saying, and they have a desire to learn the subject.

Again, Jeneane offered an example to help explain how a student's interest might make a difference in what that student learned.

> *Of Mice and Men* is an interesting story that holds its readers. I think the reading is not difficult, but if it were, I think the student would try harder because he or she would want to know what was going to happen next.

Help students connect literature to their lives. One other category of personal history-based beliefs became important when Jeneane began to make decisions about the potential value of principles of secondary reading. Like the other English majors who talked with me, Jeneane believed that her future high school students will experience little or no difficulty reading literature texts.

> Kids really know what is going on today. They have knowledge; they read the paper. They watch the news. All of these talk shows talk about this relevant stuff. They have the knowledge. Now they [have] just got to read [the literature] and see how that knowledge applies. As difficult and as time consuming as [reading literature and applying it to their lives] sounds, I really don't think it is. I don't think it would be that difficult [for them].

At least part of Jeneane's logic was explicitly based in her personal experience as a reader. She went on to explain that:

> For me it was very easy to see the connections [between literature and life]. If [the stories] didn't apply to me, they applied to someone that I knew. Or maybe I am just more aware of what's going on today. I don't know if [my students] would immediately [see connections], but I think if I asked thought provoking questions, those connections could come about.

Encounters: Jeneane's Decisions About Course Ideas

Professor Barnett spent the summer characterizing learning as a set of cognitive events which teachers can foster through instruction that supports and coaches students as they develop and use strategies for monitoring and controlling comprehension, organization and personalization of ideas. The course work invited preservice teachers to imagine teaching formats that would explicitly focus students' energies toward the development of personal independence as learners. Barnett assumed that high school students' independence in learning subject matter was the goal and that the activities and formats he modeled served that goal.

Jeneane had spent a lifetime concluding that learning is a set of psychological events dependent on how much teachers care, how interesting they make the material and how comfortable they make students feel in the classroom. She believed that fostering those conditions was both a goal in and of itself as well as a necessary context in which learning would more easily occur.

These conceptions of teaching and learning are different, sufficiently so as to provoke a debate. Encountering ideas so unlike her own, Jeneane might have confronted the differences between her own ideas and those of Barnett, weighed the new ideas carefully against her own beliefs and, in the end, either actively resisted them or thoughtfully accepted them and expanded her

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own beliefs to include them. Or, Barnett might have acknowledged the value of Jeneane's attention to affect and context and integrated her goals with his own.

That is not what happened. Instead, primed by her own experiences as a student and by her commitment to creating a classroom unlike those she had experienced, Jeneane came to this education course looking for strategies that would help her make her classroom a comfortable, non-authoritarian place where diversity would be encouraged and respected. And she found them. Jeneane was enthusiastically supportive of virtually every instructional strategy Barnett suggested. Only directed reading activities concept maps—both oral and written forms of reading guides that illuminate the relationships between questions and answers or the organizational structure of a text—engendered a negative reaction. Jeneane picked up lots of activities and sample assignments; she picked up little of Barnett's theories about how students learn or why teachers might employ those activities and assignments.

As Jeneane shared with me her reasons for supporting the instructional strategies and activities she encountered in Barnett's instruction, she did not include, use or refute any of his rationales for their use. Instead, she explained how these strategies would foster a respect for diversity, how they would help make students comfortable, and how they would make it easier for students to see her as a helpful guide rather than as an authority figure. In interview after interview, Jeneane talked about the strategies as if they were entirely separate from their supporting rationales and enthusiastically grafted them onto her pre-existing goals and values. In only one instance did she give any evidence that she was even remotely conscious of rejecting or ignoring Barnett's rationales.

Before considering whether Jeneane's responses to course ideas seem productive or whether re-framing Barnett's positions has consequences that may prove potentially harmful to Jeneane or her future students, it is worthwhile to explore how she produced this reframing by looking directly at her responses. I have divided these into three categories of ideas—reading to learn, writing to learn, and discussing to learn—matching those Barnett used to organize the course. What follows are her reasons, her arguments, for accepting as valuable the strategies for instruction that she encountered in Content Area Reading.

Reading to Learn

Barnett argued that teaching students how to read to learn is a way to help them establish independence as makers of meaning. His argument had two parts. First, Barnett hoped to establish that reading makes students less dependent on teachers as sources of information. He hoped that these new teachers would teach their students how to read subject matter texts rather than circumvent texts and depend on teachers to lecture the material. Second, Barnett hoped to show these preservice teachers how writing and discussing could be useful mediums for students to use to explore the information they encountered through reading. He hoped these preservice teachers would abandon lectures and substitute direct instruction about how to read.

Jeneane agreed that lecturing should be avoided. Her reasons for avoiding them, however, had little to do with ensuring that students learn to be independent negotiators of subject matter or text. Jeneane connected teacher talk and teacher telling closely to issues of authority and respect for diversity. When I asked whether she agreed with Barnett's statement, lecturing and other forms of teacher telling do little to help students learn, her response indicated her ability to agree with Barnett's conclusions without engaging with his rationales.

> It would be very easy for me to get up in front of the class and completely lecture, but it wouldn't aid my students in the way they need to be aided. They go through thirteen years of schooling, and a lot of [what they experience] is lecturing or telling. If there is one class or two classes where teachers do something out of the ordinary, something that's not the norm [like] let the students tell one another and talk to one another, [then] I think that can really enhance and aid a student in learning.

I was surprised when I first heard Jeneane assert that "out of the ordinary" activities aid learning and use it as an argument to support her position on reducing the amount of teacher lecturing she hopes to do. I have come to

recognize, however, that most preservice teachers value "unusual" activities because these will be "interesting" and that interested students will learn more (Holt-Reynolds, 1990; 1992a). Jeneane used this argument repeatedly.

Barnett wanted preservice teachers to abandon lecture formats. His reasons had little to do with a hope to capture students' interests with the alternatives. He assumed that teachers lecture as a way to give students access to subject matter without requiring them to read printed texts. He saw lectures as poor solutions to the problem of readers who cannot read to learn. He believed that if teachers would teach strategies for recognizing an author's organizational choices, for coping with unknown vocabulary, for locating and organizing main ideas and for actively monitoring their own comprehension, high school students could approach subject matter texts directly. They would not need to use teachers' lectures as their primary resources. He hoped these preservice teachers would decide to teach their students to read to learn rather than perpetuate the current practice of avoiding texts and lecturing to students (see Holt-Reynolds, 1991).

Jeneane indeed seemed disinclined to lecture. However, her reasons for abandoning lectures had nothing to do with seeing them as a poor substitute for helping students who cannot read to learn have at least limited access to subject matter. She did not see lecturing as inappropriate teacher control over access to subject matter or as an inherent barrier to students' development of independence as learners. Given her strong beliefs about the necessity of shared authority in classrooms, I was especially puzzled by her apparent unawareness of Barnett's premise.

I waited until our final interview to bring this issue into our conversation myself or to make it specific to Jeneane's subject matter. Beginning with Barnett's most basic premise, I asked whether she would imagine that her students would need her help in order to understand the plot of the literature texts she assigned (read to learn) or to develop a sense of characterization or theme or even to connect the literature with their lives (act as independent learners). To each of these questions, Jeneane responded "No."

> I think that anyone can sit down and read a book or read a story and analyze it in their own way. A lot of [teachers] don't credit students and therefore they tell them, "This is how you do it," instead of giving the student a chance to really voice their opinion and tell how they feel, giving them the chance to analyze literature on their own. . . . I don't know if they will sit down and read a book and think, "Oh this must be the characterization," but, after reading a story, you will be able to sit down and give a description of the character. You may not know that this is characterization. [Students need help] only because you are told that you can't do it. I remember sitting in English class reading a poem and thinking, "This is [about] whatever," and the teacher saying, "This poem is about x, y, and z. And the poet meant for you to understand whatever." And [I was] thinking, "Oh well, I'm just wrong. I can't really analyze poetry." I think [students should be] given the chance to interpret it the way they want to interpret it, and then maybe the teacher could say, "Everybody has their own ideas. From sources I have found, the poet meant blah, blah, blah. What you [think it] means isn't wrong." . . . If given the chance to analyze in a manner that they want, students can analyze poetry. . . . Often times it is assumed that they cannot.

Jeneane believed that students will read as independent learners without her help as a teacher. She linked her concept of teacher-as-authority with her sense of value for students' diverse opinions and concluded that teachers' low expectations are the reason students do not *seem* to read literature well. She explicitly based this conclusion on her own experience as a reader of poetry in high school. I have not adjusted her use of pronouns in the above quotation in order to leave apparent how interconnected Jeneane's own experiences were with her conclusions about what the experiences of her future students might be.

Jeneane's statements above also illustrate how vital her personal history-based concerns were to her decisions about how teachers should react to students' difficulties with text. Barnett traced students' difficulties to texts' demands or to students' inadequate skills. Jeneane traced them instead to teachers' expectations. Her

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attribution for what "caused" her own difficulty served as a foundation for her prediction about what teachers might do to make literature less problematic for students.

Barnett concluded that students will need cognitive support and that teachers should give that support rather than lecture away students' need to read. Jeneane, as a talented reader in her own right with little sense of what might be difficult about her subject matter for high school students unlike herself, concluded that they will need psychological support. Without explicitly countering Barnett's underlying cognitive rationales for abandoning lectures and substituting writing and discussion, Jeneane went on to decide that, on a psychological level, each of these mediums could help students learn while lectures might only act as business as usual and bore students unnecessarily. She accepted Barnett's bottom line—abandon lectures; use writing and discussions—but her reasons had little or nothing in common with his.

Writing to Learn

Barnett valued writing as a tool to foster students' thinking, their personal connection to subject matter, their ability to ask questions of themselves and of text and know whether they had read the answers. Jeneane also valued writing as a process rather than as a product. However, the process she was concerned about fostering had little to do with learning subject matter. Jeneane talked about writing as a tool for helping students feel comfortable.

> I want to use writing as a way for someone to express themselves and feel comfortable writing. . . . I [would tell students], "You may be the only one who sees this connection, but as long as you can back it up, that's okay."

Since writing to learn strategies occupied such a large portion of the course, Jeneane and I talked about many kinds of classroom writing alternatives. She valued using journals because, "Writing journals gives students a chance to really express themselves instead of saying what the teacher wants to hear." She valued the I-Search because, "It's important to let students know that just because a person is an author, it does not mean he or she is an authority. I think an I-Search can show students how much is available." She evaluated a project helping students write and publish their own work because it would be "a really good way to get students interested and involved. It's not the same old boring thing." And she acknowledged Barnett's distinction between grading students' writing and responding to it. Jeneane, like Barnett, preferred responding to writing rather than grading it, but her rational supporting this decision reflected her personal history-based beliefs about the effects of competition, not the course-based ideas she heard from Barnett.

> Students are on all different levels. You may have someone who comes in doing D work, but by the time he leaves, he's doing B work. That is excellent for that student. If you compare him to someone who is getting As, then he's not doing well. If you let an individual only compete with himself or herself, then they are really striving for something. . . . You can really make or break someone with grades.

In each instance, Jeneane came away from the course valuing the writing to learn strategies she had encountered. But her reasons for valuing them reflected only her prior knowledge, nothing of the rationales Barnett labored to introduce.

Discussing to Learn

Barnett treated "discussing to learn" as if it were synonymous with using small group instructional formats. While Jeneane valued discussions, she had little use for small group activities. Her rationale for valuing whole group discussions actually precluded any use of smaller, simultaneous discussions.

> I want to have discussion in a circle so that it doesn't seem like I'm an authority figure and so [students] can see that their ideas are just as important as mine. In a small group, that point wouldn't come across because I couldn't be in all the small group discussions [simultaneously]. Although I'm the teacher, that doesn't mean that my beliefs are right; they are just mine. I really want that point to come across more than anything. . . . I want my students to feel comfortable, that they are as important as President Bush. I don't know if that's a principle from [the course] or not. No, I guess it's my principle again just to make sure students realize they are important, that they can make a difference.

Jeneane made this comment after I asked her to point out any principles from the course she had actively attempted to include in her final, written project a unit of activities. Here is her *only* reference to any perception of a difference between her principles for good teaching and those she encountered through the course. Note that she did not talk as if using her principle rather than Barnett's mattered very much.

The amazing part of this story is how apparently unamazing it is. Despite dramatic differences between professor and student views, there was no overt conflict, no dramatic struggle to reconcile discrepant points of view, no conscious resistance. Jeneane enthusiastically accepted Barnett's suggested teaching strategies; she illustrated their use via her final project; she received an A in this course that she told me she had enjoyed and found useful.

Conclusions: What I Learn From Listening To Jeneane

Jeneane's case helps me see how some—probably many—preservice teachers are likely to react to course work. She entered the course already committed to several goals. She had developed these goals from interpretations about her own living and based them upon conclusions she had reached about what she would rather have had happen to her. These goals presumed that learning would most certainly occur if only she as teacher could provide an adequately supportive social and psychological environment for students. The course Jeneane took presumed something quite different—that students learn when they acquire requisite cognitive skills. Neither Jeneane nor Professor Barnett acted as if they were conscious of the differences between their beliefs about learning or of how each belief might inform the other. In the end, Jeneane enthusiastically adopted suggestions about strategy without questioning, changing, validating or giving much attention to her beliefs about what she as a teacher should do to help students learn.

Is This a Problem?

By virtue of enrolling in this course, Jeneane encountered a new set of strategies to use in classrooms. They looked to her as if they might indeed work very well in her future classroom; so, she severed them from their original purposes and grafted them on to her own previously constructed goals. Did Jeneane do something that I as a teacher educator should prevent? I think so, but what exactly?

Is the meaning she constructed likely to harm students? I doubt it. I suspect that Jeneane's reframing of the contexts into which she will use the course-based strategies will "work" and that these strategies will indeed help fulfill the goals onto which Jeneane grafted them. Writing that is not graded will probably help students become comfortable about their writing. A teacher who refrains from imposing her interpretation onto a whole class discussion of a novel will very likely communicate that students' interpretations are inherently valuable.

Are Jeneane's goals inappropriate? I think not. Most teacher educators value the goals onto which Jeneane has grafted these strategies. She wants her students to feel comfortable about themselves, about their limitations and about those qualities that mark them as unique. She wants them to respect the uniqueness of others. She hopes to demonstrate that her authority as teacher does not give her ideas priority over those of her students. She wants them to feel that she cares for them as individuals, that her class is interesting and that she is willing to try unusual activities in order to interest them. These are features of teachers' interactions with students that we hope all preservice teachers will incorporate into their work.

While not inappropriate, Jeneane's goals and the learner characteristics she plans to consciously strive to foster fall into the category of "necessary but not sufficient." They are based on an assumption that learning is a given and that teaching is about organizing classrooms and resources so that learning becomes more comfortable, more student controlled, more enjoyable and so more thorough. Not only do I question this assumption, I also question the validity of the superordinate assumption upon which Jeneane has based it—"All students are probably a lot like me."

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If Jeneane really were to find her future classrooms populated exclusively with students exactly like herself—talented, skillful learners who thrive on individualized attention, intellectual freedom and personal self-control—her assumptions might prove accurate. And actualizing her goals might serve these students sufficiently well. But the classrooms Jeneane will enter if she does teach will most certainly contain some students whose abilities to read to learn are inadequate given the demands of the texts they need to read. She will find herself teaching students whose skills as readers and learners differ dramatically from her own.

I can easily imagine a scenario where Jeneane achieves the goals she now values. She uses writing to foster a sense of comfort about one's own beliefs and discussion to prove that all ideas are as valued as her own. She demonstrates her caring attitude and students feel comfortable enough to disagree with her. As a consequence of feeling comfortable, respecting differences among their peers and sharing authority with their teacher and peers, will her students expand their skills as readers, develop and use new strategies for making sense out of subject matter and broaden their repertoire of inquiry methods?

Unlikely. Rather, I believe that Jeneane will feel herself failing as a teacher even if she succeeds at producing the environment in which she imagines students will learn (see Holt-Reynolds, 1992b). In a context such as Jeneane imagines, more goes on than she has yet noticed. Teachers who believe they must also strive to achieve academic, cognitive goals go beyond social, psychological and motivational factors. They invite students to engage in academic tasks deliberately designed as vehicles to introduce or practice strategies that will help students become more skilled readers, writers and thinkers. Jeneane had not identified and committed herself to the full range of elements both necessary and sufficient for learning. Yet, the course she took would have been a great place for her to discover this.

I read Jeneane's case as a story about a set of problems we tend to overlook as teacher educators. It is easy for us to recognize the problem of preservice teachers' resistance to new ideas or new conceptualizations of their roles as teachers. We can see, hear and respond to overt objections. But the Jeneanes in our classrooms can pass unnoticed. These are the preservice teachers who enter discussions in apparent support of our ideas, who turn in written work—projected lesson plans—illustrative of our ideas, who smile at us and like our course and thank us when it's over. They enter course work with a set of personal history-based goals, and they leave carrying away several very serviceable ideas for how to achieve those goals without ever examining whether the goals they are servicing reflect the kinds of interactions they will need to produce in order to teach the range of students they are likely to encounter. Yes, this is a problem. And it presents us with a challenge.

What Is My Responsibility Here?

When I listen to Jeneane and to the preservice teachers I encounter each semester, I am often awed by the sense of commitment I feel behind their words. Like so many of our potential colleagues, Jeneane wanted to teach *well*. She believed in the inherent abilities of students to learn. She saw the subject matter as vital and alive. Yet she failed to find in her content area reading course the expanded vision of what teaching subject matter *well* might involve.

It is difficult to talk here about teacher educators' responsibilities for preservice teachers' learning without seeming to indict Barnett in some way. Yet, there would be no case of Jeneane were he not committed to the teaching of preservice teachers and eager to understand how they make sense of course work. As the author of this story, I elect now to move away from any reference to Barnett as a particular teacher educator and to think instead about how I might act responsibly toward preservice teachers who, like Jeneane, seem ill-equipped to use their course work to grow as teachers. The case of Jeneane helps me recall my own commitment to teach preservice teachers well. Based on her case, I find three actions I can take in an attempt to make a difference.

Assisting preservice teachers to engage the debate. Much of what we do in teacher education course work is based on what is really only our tacit assumption that preservice teachers are aware of the discrepancies between their conceptualizations of teaching and learning

and those we hold. Jeneane's case adds evidence to support a growing doubt about the validity of that assumption (Bird, Anderson, Sullivan & Swidler, in press; Feiman-Nemser & Featherstone, 1992). Increasingly, I am convinced that I often act foolishly. I assign readings and ask preservice teachers what they think of the ideas contained in those readings as if the work of finding ideas that differ radically from their personal history-based convictions were simple, uncomplicated, and inherently exciting to do. I model teaching formats and instructional practices and assume that preservice teachers "see" what makes these worthwhile and different from teaching-as-usual (see Ball, 1989; McDiarmid, 1989).

Jeneane's case helps me remember that at least some preservice teachers are unable to perceive that the rationales we articulate in defense of the practices we advocate reflect a conception of teaching and learning that differs from their own. They honestly believe that the goals they imagine achieving in classrooms one day are exactly the goals we are presenting, discussing, modeling, reading about and advocating in course work.

Too often we act as if preservice teachers' growing proficiency with practices at the level of demonstration is accompanied by growing development at the conceptual level. Jeneane illustrated appropriate uses for journal writing and other forms of writing to learn. She in no way indicated that she knew that her reasons for using these strategies differed from Barnett's rationales (see Knowles, 1990). Her practical proficiency passed for conceptual change.

This part of her story suggests that it is *my* responsibility to identify the ways in which the personal history-based conceptualizations that preservice teachers bring with them into my courses might interact with the conceptualizations I hold and argue. As I do the work of helping them create themselves as teachers, it is *my* responsibility to generate debate, critical analysis, or dialogue about possible rationales underlying the use of specific classroom strategies or activities. I cannot assume that the absence of overt objection to my rationale reflects preservice teachers' convictions of its reasonableness. Preservice teachers often want—with great enthusiasm—to discuss the particulars of implementing specific strategies; I must help them refocus their attention on the rationales, the roots, of those strategies. From these roots, fit applications grow.

In order to achieve awareness of discrepancies and start essential dialogue, I need to facilitate preservice teachers' identification of the personal history-based goals and conceptualizations upon which they are basing their decisions about course-based ideas. I need to arrange for them to hear themselves talk about what they believe will be the overarching benefits of the strategies we explore together. I need to insist that they find and explore the links they have made between past experiences as students and future actions as teachers. Then, I must help them realize that it is both necessary and safe to reconsider those links.

Balancing the debate. Jeneane's case tells me that I would do well to explore with preservice teachers the personal history-based goals and beliefs they bring with them. It does not tell me how to balance my responsibility to challenge the limitations of those beliefs with my responsibility to honor, respect and foster their valuable features. Nor does it help me decide which features to challenge, which to foster.

The social, interactional and affective goals most preservice teachers come to course work ready to fulfill are important. They embody a kind of knowing about teaching, classrooms, students and teachers that research-based conceptualizations have all too often sterilized out of our professional repertoire. The knowledge about what good teaching could be that is based in over 16,000 hours of research as a student is powerful. I want the preservice teachers I work with to preserve it.

However, the research-based goals I bring to course work by virtue of my experience as a seasoned practitioner, researcher and scholar is also valuable. They embody the theoretical, well-reasoned, linear knowledge of our profession. Each set of goals has a place in the future practice of teachers. When my students and I enter our classroom, we embark on a journey with an uncertain path but with a firmly understood direction. We want to focus on learning to do good teaching. All of us bring something

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of value. But if we fail to see how what each brings is different from what others bring, we will also fail to move beyond the place on the path where we stood when the course started.

I must help preservice teachers understand that learning to do good teaching does indeed involve developing the portfolio of strategies they believe is so necessary. But it also involves finding the range of purposes to which they might apply those strategies and developing the means of thinking about the efficacy of those purposes. It involves debate about the limitations, advantages, constraints and implications of the goals they service when they implement activities and strategies in classrooms.

Making debate seem safe. Debate is less about finding a resolution, more about locating a set of telling arguments. However, preservice teachers seldom realize this. They tend to act as if participating in a debate-like conversation requires either a conviction impervious to argument or the risk of losing one's beliefs entirely. Given this fear, explicit conversation about the limitations of beliefs must seem anything but safe! And if we remember that many preservice teachers have selected teaching as a career precisely because they believe things like caring can make a difference in the lives of children, we can begin to see how focused conversations about beliefs can seem less and less like a safe, productive activity.

It would be easy to contend that preservice teachers ought to be academically tough-minded and able to face a challenge to their beliefs, or they ought to find another career. I have, in fact, heard teacher educators take just such a stance. However, I will argue here for a more generous position. Part of my responsibility as a teacher educator is to arrange a context in which preservice teachers can acknowledge cherished beliefs and challenge them without fear that to do so will mean forfeiting their primary goal—to become a teacher. This is easier if I truly believe that the personal history-based goals preservice teachers bring to our discussion do indeed have value. I can make looking at the limits of their value safer by showing preservice teachers how the research-based, theoretical contributions I have to offer often extend, elaborate, define and incorporate social, emotional and affective goals.

Finding the relationships—the fit—between the goals of preservice teachers and of the professional knowledge base is *my* responsibility. In the same way that my awareness of the distinctions, discrepancies and differences prompts the debate, so my awareness of the potential for integration, mutual benefit and appropriate fit makes the debate safe and productive.

What Does the Case of Jeneane Mean?

Just when I think I know how to examine my teaching and evaluate its effectiveness, along comes a story like Jeneane's to invite me to look again at what I count as success in my classroom. For me, her case means that the seemingly concrete indicators I typically use to assess my students—assignments, class discussions, questions they raise—may be less reliable than I would hope. It means I get a chance to renew my commitment to the importance of personal histories as bases for any attempt to facilitate preservice teachers' education. Jeneane's experiences of growing up, learning, living in schools are intimately known to her. She references them with varying degrees of consciousness. But they are unknown to me. And unless I find ever more powerful ways of inviting her to share these decision-guiding stories and rationales, there is little I can do to participate in her journey. It means that my job will never become routine.

Notes

[1]Although the font used for block quotes in NCRTL publications is smaller than the font for the main text, this should not be taken to indicate that the quoted text is less important.

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